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# WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT: GENDER, GOVERNANCE, AND LAND IN AFAR, ETHIOPIA



WOMAN HERDING GOATS IN AFAR, ETHIOPIA  
PHOTO BY ANTONIO FIORENTE  
REPORT BY: ADI GREIF, ALETA STAROSTA, KATE MARPLE-CANTRELL, HEATHER HUNTINGTON, EMMA HAYWARD,  
ELIZABETH MCGUIRE, AIDAN SCHNEIDER, STEPHANIE FENNER, NICOLE WALTER, AND BEN EWING

## INTRODUCTION

To safeguard the livelihoods of people in poverty around the world it is vital to provide them with secure and stable access to land. Ensuring secure land tenure reduces the risk of forcible displacement and enables a sense of permanence that encourages land-related investment (Besley, 1995; De Soto 2000) Women are particularly vulnerable to weak property rights, which can lead to a variety of ills such as malnutrition and lack of a permanent residence. Conversely, where women are guaranteed more control over land and income generally, women become empowered to make decisions for themselves, especially over crucial decisions related to household management and spending. Other development outcomes for families where women control more resources include better health care, higher child nutrition, more immunizations, increased use of contraceptives and reduced child mortality (Allendorf, 2007; Udry et al., 1995; World Bank, 2001).

Afar represents settings where customary norms are dominant for determining women's land use and access rights. Critics argue that kinship based systems are inherently discriminatory to women due to the inheritance system (e.g., Whitehead & Tsikata, 2003). On the other hand, proponents of customary institutions argue that these systems can meet the needs of local citizens in a flexible and efficient manner that aligns with rural communities' livelihood system, environmental circumstances, and values (UNDP, 2006; Knight, 2010; Namubiru-Mwaura et al., 2012). This leaves us with an important policy question—whether and under what circumstances can customary property rights provide women with secure land tenure? If we can better understand these conditions, programs can better help governments and communities work together to provide better land rights for women in customary settings. This could help improve women's livelihoods across Sub-Saharan Africa and beyond.

This gender brief provides new, detailed information on women's empowerment measures in Afar, Ethiopia, with the aim of helping policymakers understand the potential benefits of customary institutions and law for certain types of women's empowerment. This brief provides rich descriptions of the relationships between multiple disaggregated women's empowerment indicators with perceptions of customary governance and tenure security in an often-overlooked pastoralist livelihood context. This brief will provide background on the context in Afar, the survey upon which results are based, and then proceed to describe major findings related to empowerment, governance and tenure security.

## POLICY POINT TAKEAWAYS

### ON CUSTOMARY GOVERNANCE

- For both nomadic and settled woredas, there is a positive relationship between wives' satisfaction with local leaders and a host of empowerment outcomes.<sup>1</sup> Wives and household heads are generally positive toward local leaders, with around 40% each agreeing that leaders are fair, transparent, and working to protect land and water rights. This is evidence that customary governance and women's empowerment can improve together.
- Wives in nomadic, compared to settled, woredas perceive themselves as having more empowerment across a number of measures. Local leaders in nomadic, compared to settled, woredas similarly claim that women have more inheritance rights. Because local leaders exert significant influence over inheritance rights and empowerment outcomes in nomadic woredas with more traditional lifestyles,

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<sup>1</sup> These results are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.1$  level or smaller, providing reassurance that the results are not due to chance.

this further supports the point that improved customary governance can be positive for women. It also undermines the stereotypes that pastoralist women live more constrained lifestyles (Flintan, 2008). In fact, women in settled woredas may benefit more from empowerment activities.

## **ON TENURE SECURITY**

- There was a positive relationship between tenure security and a host of attendance and participation outcomes for community meetings on land resource use in settled woredas (although not in nomadic woredas). This supports our expectation that if women feel more security over their property, they will feel empowered to engage more in community meetings. Of those women who did not attend community meetings, close to 30% reported not being invited.
- Surprisingly, in nomadic woredas more tenure security increases wives' decision-making power over grazing, but decreases their meeting participation. In nomadic woredas, women range further to graze livestock or fetch water. It may be difficult for them to justify taking time for meetings if tenure security is high and so there may be fewer urgent problems to discuss. Still, this discrepancy between decision making and participation indicates that the distinction between a woman's private and public choices needs more attention.

## **ON SPECIFIC CONCERNS FOR WIVES**

- Wives are more likely than household heads to believe that encroachment will occur on water points from regional and national governments. Because wives are responsible for household water, they are more likely to have concerns, and be well informed, about tenure security on this issue.
- Wives overall were less likely than all household heads to agree that leaders' allocation of farmland was fair. In situations of high poverty, dividing farmland may make the land too small to support a family, providing a strong incentive for male household heads to restrict the division of farmland by giving it to fewer (and likely male) heirs.

# **AFAR BACKGROUND**

## **LAND USE AND GOVERNANCE**

In Afar, Ethiopia, poverty is high. The Afar region is part of the Great Rift Valley of Ethiopia and has one of the hottest and harshest climates on the planet. Historically, the Afar region has been populated by pastoralist communities that herd goats, cattle, and camels—around 30% of the region's total 1.4 million livestock—who depend on the rainy seasons that flood perennial and seasonal rivers and create large expanses of flooded basins and pastures. These seasonally flooded riverine areas, which Afar and their herds depend upon, also are of interest to government and private investors for their irrigation potential. To date, several thousand hectares of riverine grazing lands already have been converted to irrigated agriculture both by government and private commercial interests, including Ethiopian and foreign companies. These outside pressures from commercial farms and land encroachment continue to diminish land availability for herders (Beyene & Gudina, 2009). A more gradual but equally serious encroachment on Afar land is the spread of *P. juliflora* (regionally referred to as *woyane*), which harms animals that eat it and significantly limits land available for grazing, especially in Amibara (Admasu, 2008). The problem of limited rangeland is exacerbated by a current drought that has led to insufficient water and nutrition.



Land use varies distinctly by season. During the dry season, clan members and their herds live on riverine lands with clear clan-based boundaries. Households (*burras*) graze together with their lineage groups or extended families (*dahla*) and these are in turn aggregated into multiple clans (*kedo*) in cooperate settlements called *gantas*. The composition of the *ganta* changes during the wet season, when grazing patterns do not depend on clan and there is more mixing with other clans or *gantas* for security purposes and to reach water points<sup>2</sup>.

## WOMEN'S ROLE AND RIGHTS

Afar's custom, known as *Adda*, prescribes strong gender norms for men and women. Men are the default head of household, and they both own most property and make most of the family's economic decisions. Women are responsible for domestic chores (cooking, fetching water, childcare), for milking, producing butter, and looking after small stock such as goats. Another key task for women is gathering materials for and maintaining mobile mat houses (Reda, 2011).

Ethiopia's government has made dramatic progress revising laws to improve gender equality through a new constitution in 1995, and new family law of 2000. These laws in theory guarantee an equal ability to own land and to inherit and prohibit child marriage under 18 (although 16 is allowed with dispensation), polygamy, and marriages to the siblings of deceased spouses (Articles 7,9,11). Yet it is customary



PHOTO CREDIT: ANTONIO FIORENTE

A young girl watches survey enumerators

laws that often take precedence over formal laws and these customs are common. Wives also do not have equal inheritance rights by customary law and instead access land through their husbands. Women inherit livestock, although at reduced rates compared to their brothers, and are also given animals to milk upon marriage; they may not be allowed to sell them without consulting their husbands. In the event of either the husband's or wife's death, available kin often replace the deceased spouse (this is meant to ensure she is provided for). A woman often marries her deceased sister's husband if she is unmarried. Men often marry their deceased brother's wife even if already married (Reda, 2011).

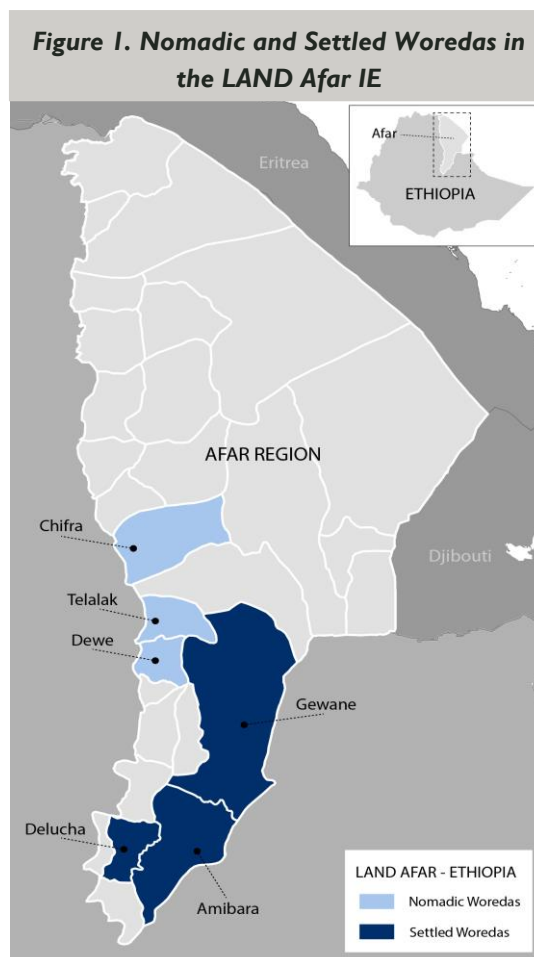
Female empowerment is linked to education and age at marriage. Afar girls complete, on average, less than one year of school, and 70% never attend school (FDRE, 2014). Afari girls marry at an average age of 16.5 and are, on average, 8.1 years younger than their husbands (Marshall et al., 2016). Most Afar practice the marriage custom *absuma*, in which a man marries the daughter of his paternal aunt (cross

<sup>2</sup> The clan head, *kedo abba*, is the lead decision maker when it comes to land use and use rights, including decisions about allocating land to outsiders. The clan elders, *daar-idolla*, give access to their clan's lands by giving other clans a type of lease, or *isso* right. (Hundie and Padmanabhan, 2008). The *fiema abba* enforces rules and regulations, working closely clan and sub-clan (lineage) leaders as well as respected elders and female leaders. Within the *ganta*, there are chosen *duwa abbas* who manage migrations to wet season areas.

cousin marriage).<sup>3</sup> Most *absuma* unions are arranged by clan elders or parents years before the marriage. After marriage, the couple lives with the husband's family in their own structure, until the wife becomes pregnant, when she goes back to her natal family until four to twelve months after birth. Medical care for childbearing women, or for Afar generally, is inadequate (FDRE, 2014).<sup>4</sup> Average family size is five or six children (Marshall et al., 2016).

## OVERVIEW OF THE LAND AFAR SURVEY

The field team collected survey data in 2016 in Ethiopia as part of the baseline data collection efforts for the USAID-funded Land Administration to Nurture Development program in Afar, Ethiopia.<sup>5</sup> Respondents came from 266 communities across five woredas of Ethiopia's Afar region (Amibara, Gewane, Delucha, Chifra, and Dewe) (see Figure 1) from March–June 2016.<sup>6</sup> Data collection involved a household survey stratified by female-headed households as well as a wife survey linked to a subset of male household head responses. Survey topics included resource management, land condition, tenure security, and governance, as well as several individual and household demographic and socio-economic indicators. The wives survey utilized many questions/modules that were identical to the household survey, in addition to gender specific modules such as assets, decision making, gender, participation in natural resource management, and inheritance. Survey enumerators attempted to ensure accurate answers to potentially sensitive questions on the wives' survey by conducting it in private, often after explaining the topics to the husband to put the couple at ease.



3 Interestingly, parallel cousin marriage (marriage between a man and the sister of his paternal uncle or maternal aunt) is forbidden because a father's brother or mother's sister often take their deceased sibling's place in the marriage.

4 The 2004 Penal Code aims to promote women's empowerment by banning gender-based harmful practices. Nonetheless, some are still widespread due to custom. For example, 90% of girls undergo genital mutilation, most in the severe form of infibulation (UNICEF, 2016; Gelew, 2010). In addition, custom demands that men eat and drink first, so in times of drought women not only have to spend more hours walking to fetch water, but are also more likely to suffer from malnutrition.

5 More information about these related USAID-funded projects is available on [www.land-links.org](http://www.land-links.org).

6 For more details on sample selection and sample size, see the Afar Baseline Report (USAID, 2016).

## FINDINGS

### DEMOGRAPHICS AND LIVELIHOODS

Respondents across all woredas are like each other in terms of ethnicity, religion, and socio-economic status. Nearly all household and wives survey respondents are ethnically Afar (97% overall, 94% of wives) and Muslim (99% overall and 99% of wives). On average, households in the study area have five members. Thirteen percent of household heads are polygamous married. Literacy rates are low across the sample. Only 13% of household heads can read a newspaper in any language and only 14% of household heads have ever attended school. Just over half of respondents (57%) describe their household as fully settled, with no household members migrating with livestock during the year. Thirty-eight percent of households describe their households as partially settled—some household members move during the year, while others remain in the ganta. Only 5% of households are fully nomadic.

The primary economic activity of household heads is herding livestock (64%), followed by wage employment (7%) house/domestic work (driven by female household heads) (7%) and farming (6%). The primary economic activity of most wives is herding livestock (43%), followed by house/domestic work (16%) and milking goats or sheep (8%). In most households, wives identify their husbands as the main contributors to the household income (76%). However, 11% of wives' report being the main income earner in their household and 7% of wives report they are an equal contributor with their husbands.

Wives are generally less likely than their husbands to personally own livestock. For example, 87% of households, compared to 37% of wives, own goats (see Table I for more details). Given the importance of livestock ownership in Afar culture, this may leave women economically vulnerable.

**Table I. Livestock Ownership by Household Head and Wife Responses**

	<b>% of households that herd or own livestock</b>	<b>% of wives that personally own livestock</b>
Non-pack Camels	33% (993)	9% (138)
Pack Camels	4% (123)	
Cattle	51% (1532)	18% (278)
Goats	87% (2612)	37% (553)
Sheep	55% (1639)	18% (270)

Livelihoods are distinctly different in the more settled Amibara, Delucha, and Gewane woredas compared to the more nomadic Chifra, Telalak, and Dewe woredas. These will be referred to as “settled” compared to “nomadic” woredas for simplicity. Households in the settled woredas are more likely to be fully settled (at 62%) than households in nomadic woredas (at 51%).

Animal migration during the dry season is more common than during the wet season, and especially affects wives in nomadic woredas. Roughly 61% of wives in the more nomadic woredas that own animals report that their animals migrate to dry season grazing areas, compared to 29% in settled woredas. Over 90% of women across nomadic and settled woredas herd the animals themselves. During the wet season, 45% of animals owned by wives migrate.



A female head of household being surveyed

The drought especially affects women in nomadic woredas. In Chifra, a group of women explained the effects of deteriorating water availability in grazing areas by saying they must travel three hours to find water for their livestock. Elaborating on their difficulties they note: “When we walk after the animals, great problems face us. For example, women sometimes give birth in direct sunlight and are exposed to extensive heat. We go carrying the children on our backs. All of us, all pregnant women and old people too, so many problems face us.” As another example, women in Telalak detail the ways that they are disproportionately affected by having to fetch water: “Women are the producers of water. For this reason, they are mainly affected by the lack of water. Suppose they do not have enough time for work at home? And pregnant women are affected by the long walk on the road.”

## PRIVATE AND PUBLIC DECISIONMAKING

Wives are less involved in livelihood income earning activities or decisions over expenditures than their husbands. When asked about their role in household decision-making regarding expenditures over the past year, only a quarter or less of wives responded that they made the majority of household expenditure decisions. The expenditure decisions wives most often reported making decisions on were: household goods (25%), food (21%), clothing (13%), health (10%), and education (9%). In terms of authority to sell household goods, 80% of wives report having no authority at all.

Wives participate less than household heads in community meetings. Nearly 20% of all household heads report participating in at least one formal meeting in their ganta in the past year to discuss grazing land issues, compared to 7% of wives. Ganta leaders do not always invite community members to attend meetings, and 39% of wives report not being invited.

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*“The elderly people sit and discuss about things, then they include the youth in the discussion, to avoid the possible risks. And the elders manage the process... Women have not been accepted as witnesses... we are weak in this sense.”*

—Women in Amibara

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Wives report low levels of decision-making authority. When respondents were asked to rank various groups by how much say they have in the community, households and wives both ranked women at the bottom by a large margin, followed by youth, with slightly more of a say, followed by the ganta leaders, with various customary leaders ranked at the top. For authority to make decisions on household dry season grazing, women in nomadic, compared to settled, woredas report strikingly more authority, likely because of their greater involvement in grazing: on a scale of authority increasing from 0 to 10, only 23% of wives in settled woredas report a three or above, compared to 60% in nomadic woredas.

Qualitative evidence further suggests that the participation of women in rangeland and water management decisions varies by level of settlement versus nomadism. For example, women in the settled Amibara explain the weak role of women (see quote). On the other hand, women in the nomadic Dewe note: “Final decisions are made with the involvement of the entire community. There is no decision made without the participation of women.”

## INHERITANCE AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

Inheritance rules favor women with children. For example, 52% of wives without children, compared to 88% with children, report that the ganta's rules allow them to inherit livestock upon the death of her husband. The difference for wives with and without children is even more striking in the case of divorce (see Table 2). Although male children are favored, the difference between having a female or male child is less stark than the difference between being childless and having children.

Wives in nomadic woredas believe inheritance rules favor women more than wives in settled woredas. The extent of these differences is striking (see Table 2). For example, 17% more women in nomadic compared to settled woredas report that ganta rules support livestock inheritance in the case of no children. That women in nomadic woredas believe themselves to have more rights shows that pastoralist women have more complex gender roles than we often assume. Subsistence livelihoods often force them into adopting a wider range of roles than are traditionally credited to them (Flintan, 2008).

**Table 2: Rules Allowing Women to Inherit Land or Livestock, as Reported by Wives**

<b>Women can inherit</b>	<b>Women can inherit if they...</b>	
<b>Land</b>	<b>...have children</b>	<b>...have no children</b>
...after Husband's death	87%	40%
...after Divorce	84%	27%
<b>Livestock</b>		
...after Husband's death	88%	52%
...after Divorce	84%	42%
<b>Women who...</b>		
<b>Inherit Livestock in case of Divorce</b>	<b>...have children</b>	<b>...have no children</b>
...are Nomadic	87%	45%
...are Settled	67%	28%
<b>Inherit Land in case of Divorce</b>	<b>...have female children</b>	<b>...have male children</b>
...are Nomadic	78%	87%
...are Settled	59%	74%



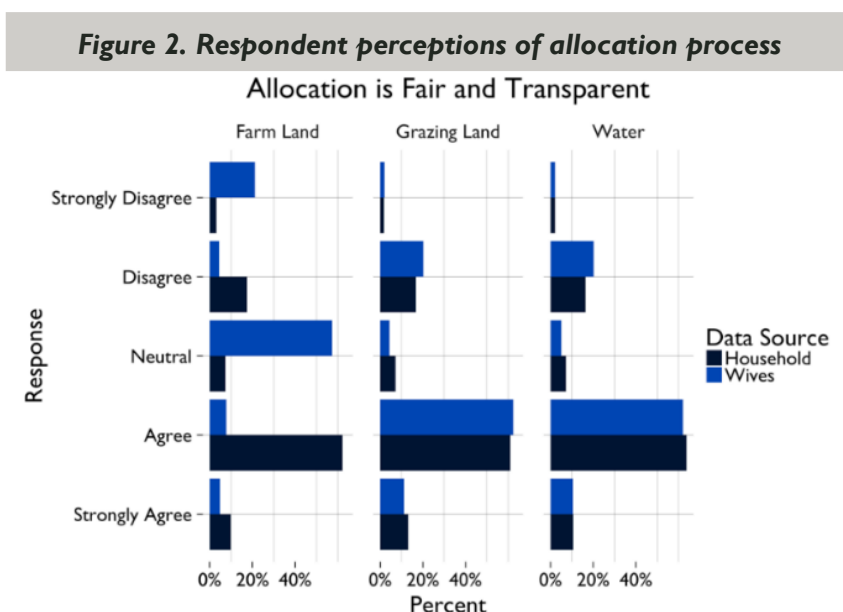
According to a statistical model relating inheritance, governance and tenure security to women's empowerment measures (see Huntington, Greif, & Ewing, 2018) a stronger perception of female inheritance rights by local leaders is associated with women reporting more participation in nomadic woredas across topics including water management, grazing, and allowing access to outsiders (see Table 3). It is also associated with increased say over dry season grazing.<sup>7</sup> The inheritance findings point to the important role customary leaders can play in women's empowerment. That these results held for nomadic woredas provides evidence that local leaders particularly influence women's lives in areas with more traditional lifestyles.

**Table 3: Relationship between Inheritance Rights and Women's Empowerment**

Inheritance Rights, as reported by local leaders	Positive or Negative Correlation in Nomadic Woredas
decision-making power for wives regarding dry season grazing	+
public participation and decision making related to...	+
...water management	+
...land management	+
...allowing outsiders access to land and water	+
decision-making power for wives regarding dry season grazing	+

## LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Households and wives had similarly positive perceptions of local governance. For both, over 40% stated that they “Agree” to questions on whether leaders were fair, inclusive, or protected land and water (see Figure 2 for results on fair allocation). Wives in nomadic and settled woredas responded similarly, with results 7–9% higher in nomadic woredas. However, wives were much less likely than households to agree that farmland allocation is fair, with over 40% of wives responding “Neutral” compared to 40% of household heads responding “Agree.” As farmland is more permanent and less easily divisible than livestock, it may be more tempting to avoid women's inheritance rights over farmland.



<sup>7</sup> All model results are statistically significant at the  $p < 0.01$  level or smaller throughout this brief and refer to models from that paper.

According to a statistical model, the results show a clear positive relationship between better customary governance and women's empowerment (see Table 4). Along with the similar inheritance rights results, this provides evidence that customary governance and women's empowerment can improve together.

**Table 4: Relationship between Perceptions of Governance and Wives' Empowerment**

	Positive or Negative Correlation	
	Settled Woredas	Nomadic Woredas
more decision-making power regarding dry season grazing	+	
public participation and decision making related to:		
... water management	+	+
... land management	+	+
... allowing outsiders access to land and water	+	+

## TENURE SECURITY

In general, households and wives feel their land use rights are secure. Less than 10% of household heads or wives believe their wet or dry season grazing areas could be encroached upon by anyone, including customary leaders, investors, or members of outside clans. The greatest perceived threat to tenure security comes from the national government, but the magnitude of the threat is still negligible. Restrictions to gantas' access to wet and dry season grazing areas are incredibly rare, impacting just 3% of gantas. Only 5% of households report any instances of grazing land being reallocated for farmland.

Perceptions of tenure security were approximately similar in nomadic versus settled woredas, except that respondents from nomadic woredas felt less secure in their water point rights, and were more concerned about investor and government encroachment on wet season grazing areas—also fertile locations for irrigation projects. This difference in nomadic woredas is true of all household heads as well as wives. Respondents report similarly high levels of perceived security about their water points. Across questions, 70–80% of household heads agree that water point rights are respected. Respondents in nomadic areas were around fifteen percentage points less likely to agree that water rights are clear and respected (see Table 5). They were also less likely to agree that the national and local government would not encroach on wet season grazing areas.

**Table 5: Perceptions of Water Point Tenure Security by Season and Marital Status**

	Right to access water points are clear and respected by...		Investors cannot take away water points without compensation
	...local government	...regional government	
Household			
Wet season grazing area	77% (1479)	72% (1386)	68% (1305)
Dry season grazing area	81% (910)	75% (851)	68% (771)
Wives			
Wet season grazing area	70% (1048)	66% (995)	68% (1028)
Dry season grazing area	68% (1024)	64% (958)	67% (1016)

Wives were more likely than household heads to believe that encroachment is likely, even though rates for both were extremely low. For the wet season grazing areas, around 6–7% of wives are concerned with water point encroachment across actors, compared to 2–6% for household heads.

Tenure security is related to many women’s empowerment outcomes according to a statistical model. For nomadic woredas, wives who feel more secure about using a ganta’s land and water are also more likely to perceive themselves as having more decision-making power regarding dry season grazing. For settled woredas, wives who feel more tenure security also report more public participation and decision making related to water management, land management, and allowing outsiders access to water. These relationships run the other direction in nomadic woredas, so wives who feel more tenure security report less public participation and decision making. In settled woredas, the more tenure security a wife reports in a ganta, the less likely it is that she is the main income-earner (see Table 6).

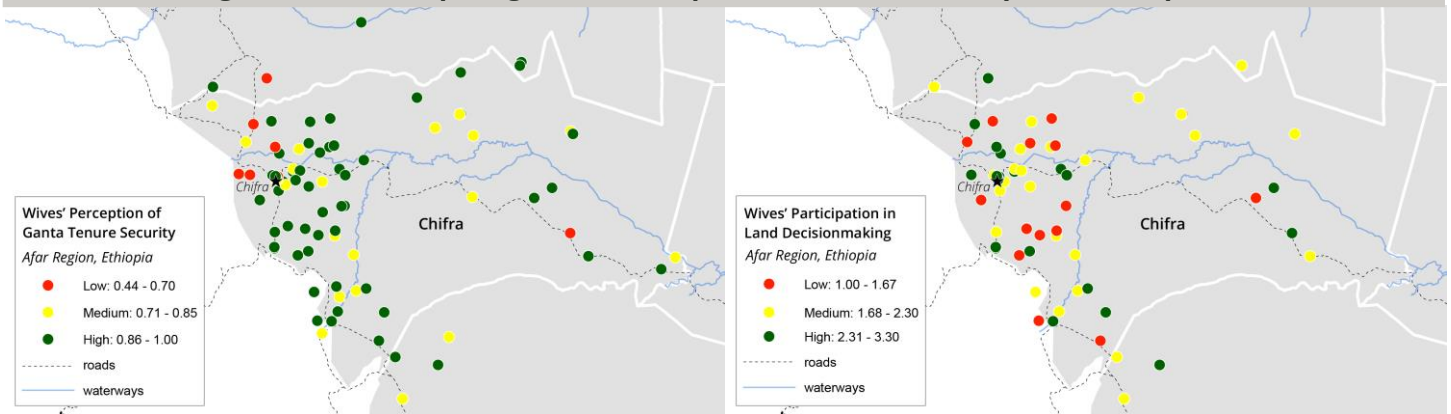
**Table 6: How Wives’ Empowerment Correlates to Perceptions of Ganta Tenure Security**

	Positive or Negative Correlation	
	Nomadic Woredas	Settled Woredas
wife main contributor to income		—
decision-making power regarding dry season grazing	+	
public participation and decision making for... ...water management	—	+
...land management	—	+
...allowing outsiders access to water	—	+

The relationship between tenure security and women’s empowerment depends on the type of community and the issue being decided. In general, settled woredas see more inclusive governance at higher levels of tenure security. It may be that improved tenure security provides women with more confidence to participate, or may provide her with more free time to attend meetings. When tenure security is high, wives have more decision-making authority on grazing land, likely because it is safer for them to use more grazing grounds, providing them options. However, for settled woredas, more tenure security also means wives are less likely to be the main income contributor. During times of uncertainty, with less tenure security, livelihood strategies may necessitate more income contribution from women. This household reallocation of income may be starker in settled woredas, where wives contribute to income less on a regular basis than in nomadic woredas. In this sense, tenure insecurity is a potential opportunity for women to assert themselves within the household and community.

But for nomadic woredas, high levels of tenure security are associated with less inclusive governance, in the form of less public meeting participation by women. In nomadic woredas where women range further to graze livestock or fetch water, they may not feel that it is worthwhile to travel to meetings if tenure security is high and their situation is relatively positive. Figures 3 and 4 shows that while ganta tenure security is relatively high in Chifra, participation is low below the town of Chifra, where women are further away from roads. On average, the women in nomadic woredas with low participation rates, (compared to high participation rates) but high levels of tenure security, are further away from population centers.

**Figures 3 & 4. Comparing Wives' Perceptions of Tenure Security and Participation**



## CONCLUSION

The quality of customary governance is a key positive predictor of women's empowerment outcomes across nomadic and settled woredas. Stronger land inheritance rights for women, as supported by local leaders, is also linked to greater decision-making power and the ability to influence both community and household decision making in nomadic woredas. This provides evidence to support the claim that stronger customary institutions have the potential to support women's empowerment.

These findings highlight the potential for gender interventions to work within existing customary governance structures, assuming there is a concurrent effort to reinvigorate and strengthen customary responsibilities to women. Our findings are in line with other studies that have found engaging traditional authorities in working for women's land rights can yield positive changes (Spichiger & Kabala, 2014; Spichiger, 2015).

In line with Allendorf (2007), we also find that land rights can contribute to women's empowerment in the house through improved decision making. And strikingly, we also find that women's land rights in settled woredas promote access to public life within the community through greater social status in consultations and resource management.

Our findings also highlight the need for nuance in understanding patterns of relationships. In Afar we find positive relationships between tenure security and decision-making outcomes. However, there is a clear distinction between tenure security and public participation outcomes in settled compared to nomadic woredas. These findings highlight a need for more differentiated assessments of the strength of *de facto* local resource tenure and governance systems, local accountability, and the benefits they provide to women when designing and implementing women's empowerment programs.



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